

# The Builder.

No. CCCLXIX.

SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 1850.



**R. HUME'S** motion in the House of Commons, on Tuesday night, "that this House, taking into consideration the condition of the cottages of the labourers of this kingdom, and the want of adequate accommodation for their families, is of opinion that a drawback should in future be allowed on the bricks and timber employed in the construction of cottages, as a means of lessening the expense of their erection," had the effect of showing that the opinion of the (few) members who were present on the occasion was in favour of the total repeal of, at all events, the unequal, unjust, and injurious duty on bricks. The motion was withdrawn, and we are glad of it, for if it had been carried it would have stood in the way of a more effectual measure. It went for too little, and originally it went for less, for, as at first worded, it stood, that a drawback be allowed on cottages the rent of which may be under four pounds per annum. The sort of dwellings to the erection of which this would have led need not be pointed out.

Mr. Hume, in the course of his speech, said, as we have often said before, with reference to the humane and wise policy which the country had lately adopted with regard to the health and comfort of the working classes, that various measures had been passed, and that Government ought to go a little further in the same direction. It appeared that, owing to the high price both of timber and bricks, the expense of building cottages was so great as to make the extent of accommodation in that respect altogether inadequate to the wants of the poorer classes. Though the duty might not be considered very great, it was impossible to estimate its indirect effect. They were all no doubt anxious to increase the comfort of those classes on whose labour and industry the welfare of the country depended. Let any one go and visit the houses in which they lived, and see these abodes of misery and wretchedness, and he would no longer wonder that the labouring classes absented themselves from home and sought the public-house and the gin-palace, where they had a comfortable room, fire, and light, to enjoy themselves. They ought to do everything in their power to make their dwellings comfortable, and Government ought to consider whether they ought not to remove those taxes which affected the improvement of the population, particularly at a time when they were expending large sums of money to promote their health and general well-being. The benefit of the repeal of the duty on bricks would not be limited to the poorer classes, but, like the repeal of the glass duty, would extend to all, and confer advantages on society year after year. While Government were forcing their sanitary measures on all the towns in the country, they were neglecting to remove the duties on bricks and windows, which public opinion pointed at as principally thwarting and stopping the progress of the people in attaining a comfortable and healthy condition. On an average of ten years the amount of the brick duty was only 481,219*l.* annually for England, and 13,000*l.* for Scotland.

Mr. Labouchere, in urging the withdrawal of the motion, said,—It was not only on the ground that the House should not entertain any proposal for the remission of any particular duty till Government had explained their views, and till the Chancellor of the Exchequer had made his financial statement, as he would do in a short interval, that he was prepared to resist the motion of his hon. friend; but even if the House were of opinion that the duty on bricks should be repealed, he would object to their expressing it in the terms of that motion. His friend gave up the 4*l.* test, seeing the difficulty of drawing a line of distinction; but the test remaining was not one which could be easily worked out. Who was to define what cottages were? The proposal would lead to the erection of a low class of houses, against which the House had expressed a strong feeling on a late occasion; and though he agreed with his friend that there could be no greater blessing conferred on the poor than to improve the character of their habitations, he was decidedly of opinion it was not for their interest to encourage the building of small and badly-arranged dwellings.

Mr. Henry Drummond contended that there should be an entire relief from the excise; that that relief should be practical, and not confined to certain parts of the country. No doubt where stone was plentiful the tax upon bricks could hardly be felt; but the case was wholly different in those parts of the country with which he was best acquainted. He was sure that members would readily assent to the assertion that there were many gentlemen in all parts of the country anxious to build cottages of at least three rooms, but such cottages as a gentleman would like to build rarely cost less than 100*l.* each, and a rent could not be obtained to remunerate the outlay without overcrowding. The duty on bricks at present enhanced the price one-fourth, or perhaps one-third [more than that]; and he really thought that something ought to be done towards relieving the public from the pressure of that injurious impost.

Mr. Peto, amongst other speakers to whom we need not refer, expressed his conviction that the lower classes of society would never be much improved by education so long as they continued to occupy their present wretched dwellings. In many places whole families occupied only one room, there being no separation of the sexes. The fact was, that half the labours which the magistrates went through were occasioned by the manner that the poor were housed; and he must insist that it was the duty of Parliament to do all that was in its power to place them upon a footing of comfort, and, if possible, of respectability.

We should like to have heard the builders' representative, too, the excellent member for Andover, give a good practical down blow on this occasion to an impost which prevents the exercise of industry and art, presses most injuriously on the poor, and withal produces to Government so little as compared with the sum it takes from the pockets of the people, and the bad effects which result from it. The inequality of its pressure is manifest when we remember what a much larger proportion the brickwork of the poor man's cottage bears to the whole outlay than it does in the rich man's mansion. It is this tax which, being levied on the bricks when in a green state, leads to the use of the abominable rubbish used under the name of bricks in and around the metropolis, to the peril of her Majesty's subjects, and, by confining the manufacture in few hands, and other

modes of operation, makes the price of this rubbish nearly double what need be paid for good bricks.\* So far as safety and stability are concerned, to many a brick is a brick, and it is put into its position without thought of the difference which exists between bricks of different qualities,—a difference which amounts to this—as we proved by experiment some time ago—that while a well-made properly burnt brick stood unharmed beneath the pressure of 60 tons, others of different make were crushed by 3 tons.

There appears to be considerable anxiety throughout the country to effect improvements in the manufacture of brick, and treat it artistically, but nothing will be done till the duty is taken off. The communications to us on the subject are numerous, and suggestions of all kinds are thrown out. Thus, one correspondent says, with reference to vitrified brickwork:—

"Some years ago it struck me that it would task our invention but little to contrive a weather-proof surface to our dwellings, which would render them more sightly and more durable. I would suggest to a brickmaker the moulding of a clay block, of 1 foot or 18 inches square, by 6 or more inches thick; the face glazed as pottery,—the back raw, and likewise the edges, with a groove on the lower, and a slider ridge on the upper,—something like the fittings of a dovetail; the girders and binders might be case-hardened, and polished at the ends to build in,—the joints to fit so close as to admit only a smearing of fine mortar; thus laid in the structure, with a neat pointing if necessary, we might have an impervious crystal cover, without living in glass houses. There could be no artistic difficulty in the superficial imitation of a sober granite, rich porphyry, or other choice quarry; while the appearance would be unique,—wet or dry of the same cast and colour, and lasting for an age.

"Again, we might cherish the thought of bringing such polished material to the inside of our apartments,—to our hearths and "penates:" with the sides so enamelled, dust could scarcely lodge, or damp strike through, excluded by an incombustible superfiice. We have seen tessellated pavements and painted tile floors: why not make the glazed sides of rooms? and they might thus be as splendidly ornamented as if with decorative papers. The gloss might illumine the cornice, the ceiling, the column, the pilaster. To me it seems not unlikely that we might fuse a glassy coating over a roof, so as to form a sheet of entire casing, or to rough glaze the walls, whether of brick, stone, or plaster."

In reply to the question in our last, as to the present manufacture of ornamental brick chimney-tops, the architect of the Earl of Leicester informs us, that the manufacture of ornamental brick chimneys is continued at Holkham, and that the examples of

\* The *Daily News*, in a recent article on the importance of getting rid of this duty, says:—"It was originally a war tax, imposed by Mr. Pitt in 1794, in order to provide for the payment of the debt incurred by the American war. No tax that ever was imposed by Pitt was more vehemently objected to in Parliament. It met with the most decided opposition, and was only adopted after great difficulty, and upon the distinct understanding that a custom duty upon earthen stone and slate should also be imposed. Such duties were levied for many years, but they were found so objectionable that ultimately they were repealed, though the tax on bricks had meanwhile been doubled. So much for the good faith of Government to the brickmakers. The tax on bricks, as at present levied, is most onerous upon the manufacturer. All bricks must be of certain dimensions. They must be made in sheds duly entered and regularly marked, and numbered by the Excise. The duty is charged whilst the bricks are in a raw, or green state; and no matter what damage they may subsequently suffer, the excise will allow the manufacturer no compensation beyond one-tenth for injury. This allowance operates most unequally according to the different situations of the brick-works, and there have been cases where thousands of pounds' worth of imperfect bricks have been ruined either by frost or flood, or hot weather or wet weather, without the slightest compensation being afforded by the excise to the unhappy sufferers."